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## *Analysis: an introduction to ethical concepts*

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### Body and soul

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#### **Ethics without a soul**

'John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on'. Where then is John Brown? We speak of *his* body and soul, but where is *he*? Would it be better to say 'John Brown lies in the grave, but his soul goes marching on'? By his 'soul' we would mean his spirit, what his life has meant: He has, let us suppose, died for a cause, or written books, or painted pictures. Thus, long ago, the Roman poet, Horace, said 'part of me lives on'. For some people this is all that can be reasonably affirmed about John Brown's soul once he has been put in the coffin.

But others would want to say: 'John Brown's body lies in the grave while John Brown goes marching on'. This is much the same as saying: 'John Brown's clothes lie on a rock while John Brown is swimming in the sea'. John Brown's death is his stepping out of his body, which is simply 'the muddy vesture of decay'. Death is an important event certainly, even a unique event; but it is just an event, something that happens to my friend John, something that will happen to me.

Most people hold one or other of these views. Some recent or contemporary philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, A J Ayer, Iris Murdoch and Jean-Paul Sartre hold the first view. For these philosophers, as for many less exalted thinkers, John Brown lies in the coffin, and ends up by mouldering quite away.

It might be thought that for thinkers such as these it does not much matter what John does or what is done to him, since he (and we with him) is but a flash in the infinite darkness. But, in fact the opposite is the case. These thinkers are all quite fiercely ethical. Indeed they sometimes give the impression (this is especially true of Sartre and Iris Murdoch) that all life and happiness, all possible immortality must be sacrificed to the ethical, to virtue and authenticity. What matters, they tell us, is the here and now, and the achievement of sincerity and love within its narrow limits. To talk of an immortal soul is to escape this challenge to

act nobly and well, because that is the inner meaning of human life. This is very near to the great moral rule of Immanuel Kant, which is that true moral goodness consists in doing what is right for no other reason than its being simply the right thing to do.

#### **Man as soul and spirit**

Yet it must be said that most of the great philosophers and sages over the centuries have believed that John Brown survives, and does in some real sense go marching on. Plato in the fourth century BC expresses this conviction most movingly and persuasively. In his own deepest experience of himself Plato felt that he belonged to the world of eternal things rather than the changing world of his bodily being. He gave various arguments for this conviction, and many thinkers since then have sharpened these arguments, or added to them. Even Kant, for all his emphasis on pure moral goodness without hope of reward, yet held that the very force of our sense of duty carried us beyond the borders of death. In our own day some of the great existentialist philosophers such as Marcel and Jaspers see man as spirit open to eternal horizons. For Marcel as for many other thinkers man is rooted in a love that is stronger than death. It is not true to say, therefore, as one sometimes hears said, that there is no philosophical or logical foundation for the existence of the soul. It is true that some years ago an English philosopher named Gilbert Ryle parodied this concept under the title of 'The Ghost in the Machine' and many academic philosophers follow him. But continental thinkers, for the most part, regard this as 'an Anglo-Saxon aberration'. Even within his own country, Ryle's dismissive rhetoric has been strongly challenged. It is well to note in this regard a common confusion between the proposition that some philosophers question the validity of the notion of the soul and the arguments in favour of it (which is true), and the proposition that the notion is incoherent and the arguments invalid (which simply begs the question).

It would be interesting to go on to examine the empirical or experiential evidence for the reality of survival after death, which has been assembled by authors such as Dr Moody and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. But there is not space for this here. Neither is

there space for the theological argument based on the life of Christ culminating in the resurrection from the dead. Some of this kind of argument will be found in the books listed below.

Rather than attempting to summarise this evidence, I wish to speak of what the poet Wordsworth calls *Intimations of Immortality*. Wordsworth, in his great *Ode*, tells how his childhood was clothed in a light, a 'vision splendid', a 'glory and a dream' which assured him that he had come into this world not from his mother's womb but from afar, bringing with him some of the glory of the soul-world. Like many people I feel I share this intimation in some measure. But what with me is more vivid is the sense I have that when I go to sleep I entrust myself to a soul-world. Why do we so serenely pass over into a state in which we so deeply lose ourselves, which may last for a million years for all we can avail of ourselves, unless we lose ourselves in our deeper selves, unless somehow we are being bathed in a world of soul or spirit? A few times in life we know this; we awaken from out of a world of sheer freshness and delight. Here for me is an intimation of soul. I do not say it is a proof. It does not need to be, for there are plenty of proofs apart from it, for those who try to open to the fullness of reality and of man's being.

### **Ethics with a soul**

It has been said that those who see man as a body doomed to die do not, as might be expected, affirm the pointlessness of morals, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they glory in the pointlessness of morals insisting that the sphere of morality has its ground in itself, that man is all the more obliged to do what is true and loving because this

brings no reward beyond itself. This is certainly a high approach, and may be said to be full of nobility as well as pathos; yet it is doubtful if it can really give a basis for human dignity. If an old person who has little sensibility and less sense is no more than a decaying body, I may indeed show great love in still caring for it: but if this old person is in truth an immortal spirit, then I am in the presence of a divine mystery which I must respect as I respect the divine presence in my own soul. So, too, the child in the womb is immortal spirit even from the moment of conception. Not only that, but human conception itself, and all that surrounds it, is illuminated by the world of spirit shining through it.

This does not by any means rule out the celebration of life and the glory of human love, but rather enhances and transfigures these energies. Finally, ethics with a soul looks differently at death. Death is no longer an enemy, but rather a companion. I do not fear my own death as the end of all, nor does death take my friends away from me. It follows that in dealing with illness and old age I take full account of each death, and give it its proper place.

Paradoxically, I am able also to mourn death; for I can look at it directly and make it part of ongoing life. My tears flow towards a new life; my grief opens up the depths of my being where my own death is waiting for me.

### **Some relevant reading**

Plato, *Apology* and *Phaedo*.

The Gospel according to John.

Wordsworth, W, *Ode on the intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood*.

Moody, R (1975). *Life after life*, Corgi books.

Hick, J (1976). *Death and eternal life*, Collins.